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Ranks of Southern Baptists Are Still Growing Thinner

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NASHVILLE. (AP) — The number of people baptized in Southern Baptist churches fell last year for the third straight year to the lowest level since 1987. Total membership dropped by nearly 40,000.

Baptisms in 2007 dropped more than 5 percent to 345,941, compared with 364,826 in 2006, according to an annual report released Wednesday by LifeWay Christian Resources, the publishing arm of the [Southern Baptist Convention](#).

Total membership was 16,266,920 last year, down from the 16,306,246 the year earlier.

Southern Baptists make up the nation's largest Protestant denomination. The drop in numbers reflects trends in other declining mainline Protestant churches, which are losing members as nondenominational and unaffiliated churches are growing.

For a denomination that places winning converts at the heart of its mission, the continued slide among Southern Baptists is troubling and disappointing, said the Rev. Frank Page, the convention's president.

Part of the blame, Mr. Page said, can be placed on a perception that Baptists are "mean-spirited, hurtful and angry people" and that the denomination has been known too much in recent years for "what we're against" than "what we're for."

"Our culture is increasingly antagonistic and sometimes adverse to a conversation about a faith in Christ," he said.

"Sometimes that's our fault, because we have not always presented a winsome Christian life that would engender trust and a desire on the part of many people to engage in a conversation on the Gospel."

The convention, based in Nashville, adheres strictly to conservative beliefs, including the inerrancy of the Bible. The denomination is second in size in the United States only to the [Roman Catholic Church](#).

In the past 50 years, the ratio of annual baptisms per church member, a key indicator of church growth, has dropped sharply. Southern Baptists baptized one person for every 19 members in 1950. In 2007 it was 1 baptism for every 47, the report said.

To counter the decline, a former convention president, Bobby Welch, led an ambitious effort to baptize one million people in a year. The campaign began Oct. 30, 2005, and ended Sept. 30 the following year. Records show there were 371,850 baptisms in 2005.

Southern Baptists reached their peak number of baptisms in 1972, when 445,725 were baptized, LifeWay has found.

Though baptisms and membership were down last year, the number of Southern Baptist churches grew by 1.1 percent, to 44,696.

David Key, director of Baptist studies at the Candler School of Theology at [Emory University](#), attributed the declining number of baptisms to Baptist parents' having fewer children. Mr. Key also said Baptist leaders had not been aggressive enough in attracting nonwhite members.

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